

INTERNATIONAL SECURITY / MIDDLE EAST UPDATE
February 28 - March 6, 2013

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1. U.S. Must Demonstrate Commitment to Mideast, Mattis Says (03-06-2013)

By Army Sgt. 1st Class Tyrone C. Marshall Jr.
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, March 6, 2013 – Marine Corps Gen. James N. Mattis testified today about the potential for a perceived lack of U.S. commitment to the Middle East as forces draw down in Afghanistan.

Appearing before the House Armed Services Committee here, the commander of U.S. Central Command explained his concern and suggested ways how the U.S. can demonstrate its commitment to the region.

“The drawdown of our forces can be misinterpreted as a lack of attention, a lack of commitment to the region,” he said. “Obviously that’s a misinterpretation of what we’re doing. Those forces were sent there for missions that are going away.”

The U.S. should conduct military exercises through its military-to-military contacts with Middle East countries, Mattis said, and have their officers attend U.S. military schools to help demonstrate an unwavering U.S. interest in this critical part of the world.

Mattis also said Middle Eastern leaders cite U.S. “budget ambiguity” as “probably the single greatest factor” at the moment.

"I'm asked about it everywhere I go in the region by the regional leaders and the national leaders there," Mattis said. "And I think we're at a point ... where budget ambiguity is now starting to drive our strategy."

"What we could use most is some degree of budget predictability," he added, "like any household or business in America needs to run an operation."

The U.S. military also requires "some time to make those budget cuts right," Mattis said, as well as "a certain amount of flexibility for the service chiefs so that they can make the cuts in a way that has the least risk."

"Combined with that, and a continuing straight message that we are committed, I think we can weather this current situation and reassure our friends and make certain none of our adversaries think this is an opportunity," he added.

Mattis noted he believes "the most important point" is that open lines of communication are maintained with regional partners.

"They want to carry their share of the burden, in many cases," he added. "They are eager to do so."

"And by good intelligence sharing, by good cross-component training with our various components and their components," he continued, "we can put ourselves in a position where we're not carrying this entire burden ourselves."

Mattis also addressed the pace of the drawdown, praising President Barack Obama's plan to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan leading up to December 2014.

"The way we are drawing down right now with the president's plan allows us to keep our troop strength in the field for the next year," Mattis said. "This sends a message in itself, and we will then draw down after this fighting season."

"Further, we're going to maintain about half the troops we have there now through the Afghan election," he continued. "This shows a commitment to an election that will get the country on the right path, I think, in terms of showing a sustained commitment to democracy and solving our problems through the democratic process rather than picking up AK-47s."

Mattis noted there hasn't been a specific date set for the Afghanistan election, but it will likely be in April or May 2014.

Meanwhile, he said, there'll be "approximately a 34,000-person drawdown in U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan between now and February of 2014. So that will keep the bulk of our troops there through the fighting season this year."

Another drawdown, Mattis said, "will probably commence after the Afghan election in April or May to help them get through their election in April-May of 2014."

A third point, he said, is although Afghan President Hamid Karzai hasn't yet decided when the Afghan election will be held, there will be an enduring force there.

Obama and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen have both said there will be a continued coalition presence in Afghanistan, Mattis said.

“Enough to buttress the Afghan security forces and keep them strong and on the right track as they continue to mature,” he added.

Yesterday, the Senate confirmed that Army Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, currently the vice chief of staff of the Army, will succeed Mattis as the next commander of U.S. Central Command. Mattis is slated to retire this year.

Biographies:

[Marine Corps Gen. James N. Mattis](#)

Related Articles:

[Mattis: Iran ‘Most Significant Threat’ To Regional Stability](#)

[Afghan Forces Set Conditions for Success, Mattis Says](#)

[Austin, Rodriguez Confirmed to Lead Centcom, Africom](#)

2. Hagel, Barak Discuss Syria, Iran (03-05-2013)

American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, March 5, 2013 – Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak held talks at the Pentagon today on issues including Syria and Iran, Pentagon Press Secretary George Little said.

It was Hagel’s first meeting with a foreign counterpart since he took office as Secretary of Defense.

During today’s meeting with Barak, Hagel expressed his strong commitment to Israel’s security, including maintaining Israel’s qualitative military edge and continued U.S. support for missile and rocket defense systems in spite of fiscal constraints, Little said.

Hagel and Barak agreed that the United States-Israeli defense relationship has never been stronger, Little said, and that both nations will continue their close cooperation.

The two leaders also discussed the range of shared security interests including the need for the Syrian regime to maintain control over chemical and biological weapons in their country, Little said, noting the leaders pledged to continue U.S.-Israel contingency planning to counter that potential threat.

Regarding Iran, Hagel told Barak that President Barack Obama is committed to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, with all options on the table, Little said.

Little said Hagel also stated that the United States continues to believe there is still time to address this issue through diplomacy, but that the window is closing.

Hagel noted that he and the Israeli defense minister have had an outstanding working relationship, dating back to Barak’s days as Israel’s Prime Minister, Little said.

Hagel also thanked Barak for his kind words at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee policy conference, Little said.

And, Hagel expressed his desire to visit Israel soon and Barak stated that Israel looks forward to hosting him in the near future, Little said.

Biographies:

[Chuck Hagel](#)

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[U.S. State Department Background Note: Israel](#)

[Readout of Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel's Meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak](#)

3. Saudi Arabia, U.S. in Broad Agreement on Multiple Issues (03-04-2013)

By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States and Saudi Arabia are working cooperatively on nearly every key issue of security and mutual importance, from Iran and Syria to trade, women's empowerment and educational exchanges, according to Secretary of State John Kerry.

"The relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia is critical to both of our countries," Kerry said after meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 4.

"We're working side by side to combat violent extremism, to promote more robust trade and to strengthen ties between the American and the Saudi people," Kerry said. The secretary said the 70,000 Saudi students in the United States form a vital connection between the two countries.

Kerry, who is making his first trip to Europe and the Middle East as secretary of state, said the United States and Saudi Arabia are committed to maintaining their strong economic relationship and creating more jobs.

"On the drive over here, His Royal Highness Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal talked to me about the numbers of young people and the need to provide jobs for them and the work that His Majesty the King and others are all doing in order to provide a more diverse economy here in the region. We need to do this in both of our countries. We are also working to do that in America," Kerry said.

Kerry praised the Saudi government for appointing 30 women to the Shura Council, an advisory group to the monarchy, and for promoting greater economic opportunity for women. "We encourage further inclusive reforms to ensure that all citizens of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ultimately enjoy their basic rights and their freedoms," Kerry said.

On the shared goal of pressing for an end to the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, Foreign Minister Saud said Saudi Arabia will do everything in its power to support this.

"What is happening in Syria is a slaughter, a slaughter of innocent people, and we just can't bring ourselves to remain quiet in front of this carnage," he said. "This cannot go on."

The secretary and the Saudi foreign minister revealed a unity of views about preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

“We both prefer — and this is important for Iranians to hear and to understand — we both prefer diplomacy as the first choice, as the preferred choice. But the window for a diplomatic solution simply cannot, by definition, remain open indefinitely,” Kerry said.

The Saudi foreign minister said it is important to set a time limit for the Iranian negotiations. “We can’t be like philosophers who keep talking about how many angels a pinhead can hold. We have to talk seriously, we have to talk honestly, and we have to put our commitment clearly on the table,” he said.

4. Turkey, U.S. Pledge Increased Cooperation to End Syrian Regime (03-02-2013)

By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States and Turkey have pledged to step up their efforts to bring about the downfall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria.

“The international community is not going to stand for Scuds missiles being fired indiscriminately against innocent civilians, women, children, young people, destroying the cities of Syria. That is unacceptable,” Secretary of State John Kerry said in Ankara March 1.

“For the last two years, a civilian nation Syria has been under heavy bombing and heavy attack. That’s why it is nigh time for the international community to full sic mobilize and start to move ahead,” Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said, standing beside Kerry.

Kerry went to Turkey a day after participating in an international conference in Rome aimed at intensifying international pressure to force the collapse of the Assad regime and pave the way for a democratic political transition.

Davutoğlu stressed that the international community should open up a humanitarian aid corridor into Syria to deliver food and tents to beleaguered civilians. “They cannot sustain their families any longer. So the international community should become much more receptive of their pains,” Davutoğlu said. “That’s why the international humanitarian aid corridor should be established once and for all.”

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey, and the United States has contributed \$385 million in humanitarian aid to ease their suffering, Kerry said.

The U.S. secretary of state said the United States and Turkey share the same goal for Syria, and he stressed the joint steps the two countries have taken toward that end.

“Together, Turkey and the United States rallied to put sanctions together, which helped to reduce the amount of money flowing to the Assad regime’s war machine. Together we worked to strengthen the Syrian opposition so that we are in a position now to be able to do more. Together we saw the NATO Patriots missiles come here in order to secure Turkey’s border. Together we have worked on the humanitarian effort,” Kerry said.

Kerry said the United States stands with Turkey in the fight against all forms of terrorism, whether it is al-Qaida, the Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party Front, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), or any other.

“Ours is a very difficult task and it’s going to require the maximum amount of cooperation, and it’s going to require an international effort,” Kerry said.

Before meeting with Davutoğlu, Kerry visited the grave of a Turkish security guard employed by the U.S. Embassy, Mustafa Akarsu, who was killed in a terrorist attack on the embassy in early February.

“It’s fair to say that all of us, not just the family but all of us, still mourn Mustafa’s senseless and sudden loss,” Kerry said in a graveside memorial.

In other issues, Kerry and Davutoğlu discussed developments in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, and in Afghanistan, where Turkey has sent troops to support the NATO mission to stabilize the Central Asian country.

Kerry briefed Davutoğlu on President Obama’s plan to negotiate the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the European Union, highlighting the partnership’s potential to create jobs, break down barriers and strengthen economies.

The proposed partnership is “of crucial significance for Turkey. We believe that Turkey needs to play a significant role in that structure,” the Turkish foreign minister said.

5. Sri Lanka Gets Expertise in Land Mine Removal (03-01-2013)

Vavuniya, Sri Lanka — A U.S. military training team visited the Sri Lankan Army’s Humanitarian Demining Unit at Camp Boo-Oya, an area in the northern part of the country where land mine removal has been a main focus since 2003, to unfold the first phase of a program that will help the Sri Lankan Army enhance its medical efforts and mine-removal abilities.

From February 18 to 22, the team instructed more than 100 engineers, medics and explosive ordnance technicians in three courses: medical first responder, explosive ordnance disposal and veterinary care. The training will help the engineers in their efforts to remove land mines left from the country’s civil war that still maim and kill civilians, obstruct emergency assistance and stop freedom of movement for citizens in the region.

“Humanitarian demining allows civilians to walk in these areas with comfort,” said Brigadier General Buwaneka Randiniya, commander of the Sri Lankan Army’s Engineer Brigade.

Randiniya welcomed the team after the traditional lighting of an oil lamp, a Sri Lankan custom signifying wishes for the success of an event. He described the training as a milestone in the Engineer Brigade’s land mine removal efforts.

The Sri Lankan mine removers, veterinarian assistants, dog handlers and medics trained with a joint team of U.S. medical specialists, veterinarian specialists and explosive ordnance specialists drawn from U.S. military units in the Pacific.

The medical first-responder course provided the mine removers and medics with lessons in initial medical treatment for injured soldiers; the veterinary training covered care for mine-detection dogs; and the explosive ordnance training focused on ordnance storage and disposal techniques.

“This first phase of training will build a true capacity and capability throughout the entire Sri Lankan Army,” said U.S. Army Sergeant Major David Galati. “The second phase will integrate a medical first-responder course into the Sri Lankan Army’s engineer school’s curriculum, a change that has been approved by the brigade commander, and every engineer will get the medical first-responder training.”

Galati said mine removers and medics receiving this first phase of the medical first-responder course will work side-by-side with U.S. Army trainers during the second phase, then teach the course themselves while being observed by U.S. trainers during the third phase. The mine removers will also receive more explosive ordnance and veterinary training during the second and third phases.

The engineers receiving the training were identified for additional duties in the brigade as medics, veterinary assistants and explosive ordnance specialists in 2003 and 2004, and this is the first refresher training for many of them.

“Demining has been ongoing since 2004, and post-war resettlement and demining went hand-in-hand,” said Travis Sinniah, a defense cooperation officer and security specialist at the U.S. Embassy in Colombo. “The demining level had to be stepped up, because people had to resettle. With nongovernment organizations leaving the country, the main effort went to the Sri Lankan Army engineers, who have played a huge part in the effort.”

Sinniah said the ultimate goal is to see the Sri Lankan Army training their own, and when they have completed their job helping their people, they can go around the world to help others.

“A huge part of the mining operations is the mine-detection dogs donated to the Army by the Marshall Legacy Institute, but before the department would donate the dogs, the Army had to acquire a veterinarian to care for the dogs,” said Major Sudeera Talagala, a veterinary surgeon with the Sri Lankan Army.

The Army chose Talagala, and he is the only veterinarian in the Army.

“The dogs don’t face many medical problems,” Talagala said. “Babesiosis tick fever is the main problem; otherwise the dogs are very healthy.”

“This is a good opportunity to learn from each other and for the Sri Lankan Army Humanitarian Demining Unit to get advanced demining training from the U.S. Army, especially the medical first-response training, which is so critical in saving lives,” said U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Glenda Pollard, chief of the Office of Defense Cooperation at the U.S. Embassy in Colombo.

6. U.S. Shifts Policy on Syria, Announces Direct Support for Rebels (02-28-2013)

By Phillip Kurata
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States has shifted its policy toward Syria by deciding for the first time to send assistance directly to the rebels fighting to topple the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.

“We need to stand on the side of those in this fight who want to see Syria rise again in unity and see a democracy and human rights and justice,” Secretary of State John Kerry said at an international conference in Rome February 28. “We can’t risk letting this country, in the heart of the Middle

East, be destroyed by vicious autocrats or hijacked by the extremists.” Kerry said the assistance will be nonlethal.

The chairman of the Syrian Opposition Council, Moaz al-Khatib, attended the meeting in Rome, along with representatives from 11 other countries, including Egypt, Turkey and countries in Europe and the Gulf . They all support the downfall of the Assad regime and consider the Syrian Opposition Council the legitimate voice of the Syrian people.

Kerry announced that \$60 million in additional U.S. aid will be put directly into the hands of the Syrian opposition leaders to help them strengthen their organizational capacity as well as provide sanitation, food delivery and medical care in areas they control.

Kerry said the Syrian rebels will receive the U.S. aid without delay because part of the money has already been programmed and because members of Congress are ready to allocate more funds to bring about the downfall of Assad.

“Assad cannot shoot his way out of this,” Kerry said.

Kerry said the U.S. contribution to the Syrian rebels is just one part of the assistance package the entire group in Rome is sending to the anti-Assad fighters.

“Different countries are choosing to do different things,” Kerry said. “I am absolutely confident ... that the totality of this effort is going to have an impact on the ability of the Syrian opposition to accomplish its goals.”

Washington has provided \$385 million in humanitarian relief to Syrian refugees and internally displaced people and \$50 million in communication and broadcast equipment to help Syrian rebels communicate with each other and to spread their message throughout the country.

Al-Khatib said the rebel coalition considers the territorial unity of Syria nonnegotiable and will oppose any effort to split the country.

He added: “I am saying here and now, Bashar Assad, you have to behave for once as a human being. Stop killing and massacring this people, arresting and torturing its children. Bashar Assad, you have to adopt at least one wise decision in your life for the future of this country.”

The host of the Rome meeting, Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi, said the international community can no longer allow the Assad regime to continue to massacre Syrians.

“They have to stop violence. They have to release political prisoners, and they have to clearly enable a democratic and pluralist Syria with the exiting of Assad,” Terzi said. “The Syrian people will never be left alone.”

7. Afghan, U.S. Officials Continue Efforts to Improve Trade (02-28-2013)

Washington — Senior Afghan and U.S. officials met in Washington February 27 to continue their trade dialogue and evaluate progress under the U.S.-Afghanistan Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA).

The officials discussed a wide range of trade and investment issues, including:

- Market access.
- Trade promotion efforts.
- Intellectual property rights.
- Joint efforts to improve the movement of Afghan goods to export markets.
- Afghanistan's efforts to join the World Trade Organization by the end of 2014.
- The U.S. Generalized System of Preferences regime.
- Sector-specific investment challenges.
- Agriculture.

It was the seventh meeting of the U.S.-Afghanistan TIFA Council. The Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, signed in 2004, has been the primary forum for trade and investment discussions between the two countries, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) said in a February 28 press release.

At the December 2011 TIFA Council meeting in Kabul, the United States and Afghanistan established four TIFA working groups: Women's Economic Empowerment; Transparency and Public Participation; Generalized System of Preferences Outreach; and Customs. In the next few weeks the two governments will develop action plans for these working groups to pursue over the next year, USTR said.

The U.S. and Afghan delegations agreed to work together to promote greater awareness of the U.S. Generalized System of Preferences program and to increase Afghanistan's exports of products eligible under the program.

The governments also agreed to develop an agreement to memorialize their commitment to empowering women entrepreneurs in Afghanistan. USTR and the Afghan Ministry of Commerce will develop a Women's Entrepreneurship Work Plan with specific goals and benchmarks for the next year and beyond.

At the meeting, Afghan officials announced the preliminary approval of a mining law by the Afghan Cabinet on February 23. USTR said the law should serve as a catalyst for international investment.

The delegations agreed to continue collaborating on support for Afghan exhibitors to participate in major U.S. trade shows as well as on outreach to communities in the United States to provide information on Afghan goods.

The next TIFA Council meeting is scheduled for Kabul in 2014.
